

Nicotine Patches and Picture Books

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As far as Matt's concerned, this 'saving' bit is the worst thing to ever happen to him. When you get gunned down, you should just die, not wake up in a hospital bed months and miles later. Bloody Near never could leave well enough alone, could he?

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[Introduction](#)

[Douglas Adams](#)

[Kurt Vonnegut](#)

[Tom Robbins](#)

[Franz Kafka](#)

[Nikolai Gogol](#)

[Fyodor Dostoevsky](#)

Douglas Adams

Here's the thing: Matt woke up.

He was not expected to. Mello thought he'd died, the ambulance crew were only cursorily doing their jobs, the doctors thought for sure that he was a goner. But they rigged him up to the right machines, despite the fact that he'd almost killed the Voice of Kira. Someone from some government organization or other (SPK, though the doctors didn't know this) paid for a guard to stand at the door at all times and make sure none of the nurses decided to slip him a little too much morphine for some of their own Dispensing Justice.

Anyways, despite the gravity of his wounds, and despite all the odds being stacked against him, Matt woke up.

Because really, a three percent chance is right sometimes, isn't it?

He woke up to excruciating pain and a drug fogged pseudo-awareness and a general 'ow ow ow' that let him know that everything was *not* okay. More importantly, Mello is not in the room with him, and if Mello had survived he would have been in the room with him.

So Mello's either dead or in worse condition than he is, and from the amount of drugs and stitches and the fact that it isn't the same *season* as when they shot him, given the tree outside the window, then Mello's probably dead.

Matt whimpers, and someone rushes to his side and starts asking him questions; are you awake? Do you know who you are? Do you remember what happened?

He shouldn't have woken up.

The next time he opens his eyes, it's very late, or very early. The room is dark, but there's someone in it with him. He can hear them breathing. For a second he hopes it's Mello.

"Matt," Near whispers, curled up in his chair with his fingers in his hair. "Well then."

Matt closes his eyes tightly. He can't deal with this right now. Mello is dead. Near can't want anything from him, can he?

"We did it. Kira is dead." Near's voice holds about as much triumph as Matt feels at the news; a small swell of it, but largely hollow. Soap bubble emotions, so very easy to pop. Mello is dead. L is dead. Mr Wammy is dead. Is one misguided man's funeral enough to make up for that?

"Peachy keen," Matt rasps, and craves a cigarette desperately but he's on oxygen and also in a hospital, where they frown on that sort of thing. This is the first thing he's said since he woke up, he realizes, which makes it sound kind of silly in retrospect. He should have said something that would count. 'Cogito ergo sum.'

At least Near looks happy. Matt has to close his eyes again, feeling Mello's absence like a knife between the ribs. Or maybe that's just an actual bullet hole, he has a few of those.

"All the politicians are settling back into something approaching normal. Everyone is blaming everyone else for letting Kira become so powerful. There is an inappropriate amount of mudslinging." A small, dissatisfied pause, "Which is a metaphor. There is no real mud."

"Near, " Matt wheezes, exasperated. Mello is dead.

"We'll talk when you're feeling better," Near says, quickly, and sets something on the bed at Matt's side. Matt waits until he leaves the room, shutting the door quietly behind him, before he looks down to make out what the thing might be.

It's a stuffed bear.

"Good morning," Matt glances up at the soft voice. It's Near again. He isn't sure why he's surprised, no one else has visited and the nurses all refer to him as 'Mr Garrison.' He can only assume Near has him here under a pseudonym.

Fucker was always sharp as tacks. Near was the knife, where Mello was the fire.

Matt, Matt was just third best.

"Morning," he replies, pulling himself up to sitting. It wouldn't do to look too interested but if he has to watch one more funeral special for Misa or Takeda or Kira he is going to fucking kill someone, or himself.

No, he isn't seriously a suicide risk. They're all way too trained to be survivors for that.

He tries not to look desperately interested in Near's company, because that wouldn't be suave in the slightest and it's not like he needs any more to boost his ego right now. Then he gives up, because it's not like he's ever been good enough to fool Near anyways and if he's honest, he might stay.

"Well, you look marginally less like a five year old than the last time I saw you," Matt cracks, voice still a croak, and Near cocks his head to one side, managing to look sort of like an inquisitive kitten.

"I'm nineteen," Near replies, and settles down onto a chair, curling protectively around his knees. If Matt didn't know this, he'd have placed him as perhaps thirteen. In fact, he expected him to be younger. He must have been recovering for a long time.

"You and Mello planned to die, didn't you?"

Near still has about as much tact as he ever did, Matt is learning, very quickly.

"The best laid plans of mice and men," he replies airily, and goes back to looking out the window and pretending to be unimpressed with his surroundings. It's certainly better than looking at Near right now, who got to survive this when Mello didn't. Whose plan it really was to begin with, no matter that he and Mello were the crucial pieces.

"We surpassed L," Near marvels, and Matt shakes his head, because he doesn't believe that. They pulled a Hail Mary and got lucky. Or rather, Near did. It's all too much to think about.

"I'm tired," Matt says, surprised to realize it's even true. Recovery is a painfully slow procedure, "God, Near, I'm tired."

"The logical response would be to sleep," Near suggests, winding his hair around his fingers again, watching the doorway instead of Matt. It's a little disconcerting, but he's drowsy enough that he falls asleep almost immediately.

He hasn't slept with someone else in the room who wasn't Mello in years. Amazing what being shot will do for you.

His favourite nurse is the one with the freckles and the cute as a button look to her. She's pretty, but not standardly enough to not look surprised when he hits on her furiously. It makes her giggle, which makes him grin, even if with all the painkillers he's on there's not a chance of anything.

At all.

Even by himself.

His second favourite nurse holds the bucket while he's sick, which is good, because it's kind of embarrassing. She bathes him too, and

changes the bandages with a practised, grandmotherly air that Matt bets most of her patients recognize and are comforted by.

It only serves to unsettle him, but he's too polite to say, since she is cleaning up his filth and all.

He should never have woken up.

He's chilled to the bone all of the time, and his hair is lank and his skin is grey. He knows he must look like death warmed over. It's a little embarrassing to open his eyes, and see a bombshell blonde there. She has red lipstick and a 'take me seriously' business suit on. Her posture screams 'FBI.'

"You're Hal," he clears his throat, and doesn't bother to try to sit up, just watches her. She's obviously been working with Near long enough, she doesn't even look remotely surprised at his guess.

"He..." Her voice is thin, and shocky. Matt looks at the defensive angle of her shoulder and the tremble at the corner of her jaw, and knows exactly what it is she wants to hear from him. Problem is, she's too smart to believe it, so he settles on just telling her the truth.

"He couldn't have done it without you. He thought you were... he had a lot of respect, for you. I mean, in his own way." His fingers itch for something to do. A game controller, a cigarette lighter. "I mean, as much as he respected anyone. In a kind of 'I'm going to blow you up if you get in my way but I'd rather not' sort of deal, you know?"

Hal nods, and says, quietly, "you really cared about him, didn't you?" Matt ignores her. It should be obvious.

"He was a seize the day kind of guy. Kind of kid." None of them are old enough for any of this. "So I don't think he'd want you to, you know, be sorry. I know I'm not really following my own advice here or anything, but I always piss him off so that's to be expected."

Her face is kind of crumpling, and he pulls himself up in bed.

"Hey now, don't do that, come on, you're fine." Mello would never forgive him for making a pretty girl cry. He can see what Mello saw in her. She's his type. Insofar as Mello had types. She was fierce (behind the grief) and had a gun.

"I'm fine," she eventually manages, composing herself with remarkable poise. Matt grins, wearily, and feels his age again. None of this is really very fair.

"Can I get anything for you, Matt?" Everyone has been asking him this, the pretty nurse and the motherly nurse, and for the first time Matt answers honestly.

"I'd do anything for a gameboy, actually. I mean, you'd have to sneak it past Nurse Ratchett out there, but..."

"I'll bring it next time I visit," she assures him, and he nods, not trusting his voice. The relief is overwhelming.

He'd wondered if he could even get lonely any more, but apparently, he's only human.

As though the metal lodged near his spine weren't hint enough.

He wakes up to an Italian looking man, the next afternoon, sitting in the chair next to his bed, reading a newspaper rather than obviously watching him sleep.

"Hal had personal matters to deal with," he says gravely, when he sees Matt's eyes open, "so I brought what you asked for instead. Gevanni." He either trusts that Matt will know that he's part of SPK, or will be able to guess.

"Thanks," Matt replies, wincing at how dry his mouth is and reaching for the water on his bedside table. Near looks like he wants to help him with it, but doesn't, for which Matt is very grateful. It'd be far too depressing to need someone's help to drink.

"So it was Yagami, then?" he asks, even though he knew it was, of course it was, "how did you get him?"

"Takeda's kidnapping forced Kira's hand," Gevanni explains, "he revealed to us the location of the Death Note. I replaced it shortly after you were hospitalized, and then N confronted him." It wasn't a safe plan, by any means, but it wasn't blatantly suicidal, and Matt couldn't really object to it, since it had worked and everything.

Except for Mello getting killed, and Matt almost dying.

"What will you do now?" Gevanni asks, and Matt closes his eyes and clenches his jaw. It's a good question, and one he hasn't given any thought to.

"I'm not ready to be discharged quite yet." This is an unfortunate truth. He's beginning to get antsy being trapped here. "But when I am... I'm not sure, yet. What about Near? No competition left, huh? He's the new L." That came out a little more like an accusation than he meant it to. Matt knows, obviously, that Near didn't kill Mello in order to secure his position.

Gevanni gives him a dirty look, and Matt knows he probably deserved it.

At least he brought the gameboy.

"Hello?" Matt asks the receiver, after fumbling gracelessly with the phone at the edge of his bed. It's his first phone call ever in hospital.

"Have you been making prank phone calls?" Near asks, bluntly, and Matt grimaces a little.

"Um."

"Because the number of outgoing calls is enormous and the hospital is getting complaints."

Oh, fuck.

"I'll quit it," Matt answers, a little chagrined. It might not have been the most mature way to spend his time, but there were only three games and he's beaten all of them already, even despite the fact that he spends three quarters of his time fast asleep. "Sorry."

"You don't have to," Near just sounds curious, "I merely wondered if you really were."

"Yeah." Near must use the same voice masking device L did when he addresses politicians. No way anyone would ever listen to someone who sounds this quiet, and young, no matter how purposeful. "It's kind of mind numbingly boring up here." Oh shit. "Not that I'm not really grateful and everything, but..."

"I'll come visit tomorrow. If you like?"

Matt blinks. He doesn't think he's ever heard Near sound uncertain before.

"That'd be... cool." It actually would be. It might give him a chance to make up for being a dick earlier, even if Near wasn't there to overhear it.

"Well then." And the line goes dead. Good to see Near's social skills are as well developed as ever.

His favourite nurse brings him chocolate pudding with lunch, and then has to hold him while he dissolves into hysterics for the first time since everything. Maybe, just maybe, he's been delaying the grieving process, just a little.

"There are rallies," Near explains, as he slips into the room, cautiously, "Pro-Kira rallies, still occurring. SPK is leaving Japan within the week until the turmoil is past and we are no longer the target."

"Oh," replies Matt, "Well, um." Nervousness explodes in his chest, like hot acid, and he's absolutely in a state of panic because if there's any way they trace it back to him- how could they not? He was recorded on public television...

"You're coming with us." Near's proclamation cuts that off, and draws him up short. "That's why we've waited this long. You will be discharged, probably this Friday, and then we will board a plane to Germany."

Matt probably should have known. He presses a hand absently to the stuffed animal Near left him, fingers tracing the smooth fur, and takes a deep breath in through his nose and out through his mouth. He focuses on the texture, and on the heat of the blankets, like he was taught. Near observes, silently, seeing everything, Matt imagines.

"You need to name a successor as quickly as possible from the other children, Near, because I'm not doing it. So as you know. There's no point in keeping me around to groom or train me, I'm out of here as soon as I can walk again."

God knows how long that will take.

"Alright," agrees Near, readily, "but can I stay in the mean time?"

Matt blinks at him.

"Um. Okay."

So he stays until Matt falls asleep again.

The plane ride to Germany is excruciating. Matt is jumpy and upset, and pretty sure Near is laughing at him from behind his report.

"The stewardess, oh, pardon me, hostess, is bringing lunch around," he grits through his teeth, and Near glances up at him, and then

away. So he tries again. "You should eat something."

"It isn't the right time," says his companion, cryptically, although Matt can appreciate that. It's quite the time difference, after all.

"Time is an illusion," Matt replies, airily, "lunchtime, doubly so."

Near blinks at him, then looks down at his papers, then up at Matt again. He waits a second longer, as though turning what Matt has said over and over in his head.

"No it isn't."

"It shouldn't surprise me that you're the only person on the planet that hasn't read Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy," he feels his anxiety easing with the banter, bit by bit, "and yet somehow it does."

Near ignores him.

He wants a cigarette.

Before he knows it, they're working together. He had sworn to himself that he wouldn't, that he'd never be tricked into being the right hand man ever again, because it just hurts too much. Because the doctors weren't even sure if he'd ever be able to walk again, and he sure as heck isn't running any time soon.

Maybe it was just meant to be. Maybe Matt has, written in his stars, 'sidekick.' He pictures himself in a Robin suit, and by extension Near in bat ears, and laughs out loud while he's reading an autopsy report. Gevanni gives him a filthy look, but Gevanni has never really liked him.

Near doesn't care what he laughs at, so long as he gets into the systems and bugs the rooms for him. Near is a very functionalist little bastard.

Every decision he makes is calm and cool and unbiased, and so very un-Mello-like that Matt finally starts feeling like he can breathe again. The year-mark passes since he should have died, and he finds he doesn't regret it all that much any more.

Just at night.

And whenever he tastes chocolate.

Kurt Vonnegut

Near had always paid *some* attention to Matt. You can't properly understand an equation unless you know all the variables, and Matt proved to be difficult to decipher. At a far-from-sweet five years old, Near had stared at him, fingers curled in his hair, and decided that further observation with clearly necessary.

At Wammy's, it hadn't seemed so hard. Matt had been third best, best friend of Mello, not up to much good but not causing much harm either.

He hadn't been dangerous, and he hadn't been driven, and after that 'further observation,' Near had believed that it was as simple as that. That he could dismiss Matt as a player, because Matt did not want the same things as he did, and was not going to compete against him and was therefore not a threat.

Near was very young, back then. He should have known better. Now he does.

They leave Germany once they've stopped the smuggling organization, and they move on to Montreal. There's a child prostitution ring there that they break up. Matt hacks away and finds all the members, locations, etcetera. Near puts the pieces together and steers the police, from behind his voice-distorter.

"My father was Canadian," Matt says, conversationally, once things are done. At Wammy's, you're not allowed to talk about who you were.

"He was working in England when he met my mother." They're not *at* Wammy's any more, though, are they? And as N, Near is the one who makes the rules there, anyways. The one who makes the rules here, too.

He doesn't know what to say, though. He winds his fingers in his hair.

"So it goes," says Matt, bemusedly, and he *does* know what to say to *that* one.

"Kurt Vonnegut." Which means 'see, I am human, after all.' Matt grins at him, a proper smile, like he hasn't since he woke up in the hospital, and Near's relieved that he still remembers how. Grief can destroy a person, and it took a lot of time and effort and some very good luck to sew Matt back up again. It'd be a shame to do all that and have it all be for nothing. (He lets none of this show on his face, of course.)

"I liked Cat's Cradle."

"That was from Slaughterhouse Five," Matt corrects, and he nods. He knows. He climbs to his feet and leaves, to find some darts or something else to do.

From Montreal they head to Washington, because SPK is homesick. Hal, who hasn't been the same since everything, cries when she tells Near that she won't be joining them when they leave again. Rester and Gevanni look uncomfortable throughout. Matt looks like he understands all too well, and is the one to fetch her kleenex.

Near considers putting phone call to the police department she says she's going to be applying to, and telling them in no uncertain terms that she is one of the finest agents he's ever worked with (leaving out the fact that he's not even twenty, and she's one of the only agents he's ever worked with) and that they would be idiots not to hire her. Also, not to tell her that he said so.

He doesn't, though. She's more than qualified enough to be hired on her own merit.

Matt rolls his eyes at him as he stares at the phone. It's like he knows what he's thinking. He very well might, actually. He knows

probably everything ever written down about Near.

In Wammy's, he had access to all the children's files. He's too carefully to not have checked up on them again more recently. Near would tell him not to, but then, Matt would find some underhanded way to do it and Near would rather not make Matt do anything that involved him pulling any sort of wool over Near's eyes.

It helps that everything written down about Near, at this point, has been modified and looked over and edited, and is just accurate enough to ring as true, but entirely unhelpful. No matter what Matt might have found, he cannot trust it, and even third-best would know as much.

If Near were Kurt Vonnegut he'd have some sort of deft little saying here; loose lips sink ships, blown ass over teacup, what goes around comes around. But he isn't, and he doesn't.

So it goes.

He has never been on for frivolity, not really, but there are some pleasures Near allows himself.

He keeps his toys, because his reasoning is much more efficient when he has something to do with his hands. He keeps his matchsticks and dice and legos, because building structures helps him organize his thoughts. He keeps his darts because even he can become frustrated, though you would never know it to look at him, even L probably didn't, and frustration does not make for clear thinking.

He keeps his *books* for pleasure, pure and simple. When Rester asks, he says it's so he can keep a good grasp on the languages he speaks (when he asks how many that is, Near has to close his eyes and think for a moment) but that is a lie. He wouldn't forget a language, and he doesn't really need to know more than a few, translators aren't hard to come by.

Near *had* read Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy. He just felt it best to be sure that they both understood that time really, really wasn't an illusion and that lunch time was not particularly special in and of itself. Douglas Adams wasn't his favourite author, not by far. He was too gaudily imaginative.

For Near's taste, that is. Near has never been big on frivolity.

It's shocking and pleasing, how well Matt's talents slip in to his routine, how... indispensable is not the right word, because Near got by without him for this long and logically knows that he can do so again when the time comes for Matt to get on with his own life.

Near will make all the use he can of him until that time comes. He has had many tools, over the years, blunt and sharp, swift and slow, weak and strong. He has never had a 'partner in crime.'

Even Rester, boldest of SPK, never clapped Near on the back after a success and laughed. Even Gevanni, most emotional, never called him a moron when he was taking a risk he didn't like. Even Hal, the kindest, for all that she occasionally got a maternal glint in her eye, had never ruffled his hair.

Feigning irritation was easy, because Matt was smart enough to know it was a lie. Matt knew Near's limits in terms of patience better than anyone. Probably better than Mello, even, because Matt was the one who stood back and watched closely and dragged them apart if it ever got out of hand.

The problem now is that the person Matt was usually protecting, keeping out of too much trouble, minding, he wasn't here any more. Now the full weight of his gaze is entirely on Near, and if he hadn't been quite so good with computers, if he hadn't been quite so able to break in to a suspect's house and set up cameras, if he hadn't had such an impressive arsenal of tricks and tips, (if his hand hadn't felt quite so warm on Near's shoulder) he would have had to send him away, as a distraction.

In fact, he knows enough about psychology and about himself to say that he is making excuses. That he should send him away as quickly as possible. Because while Near hadn't really decided he needed to know a lot about Matt back at Wammy's, even then, Matt had existed for Mello, and Mello had existed to torment Near, so Matt had needed to know exactly how far it could go before it turned into serious trouble.

Near isn't even irritated with him for it. He should send him away.

But Matt still can't run, he still can't walk for more than ten minutes without starting to limp. He still wakes up with nightmares and arrives out into the investigation room, hastily dressed and pale. (His fingertip, just one, resting against the skin above Near's collar, sending unfamiliar little shocks down his spine.) He still pats his pocket for a non-existent pack of cigarettes when something gets to him.

Matt will leave when he is ready.

"Those are bad for your teeth," Near warns, placidly, as Matt reaches for another peppermint.

"L used to eat sugar all the time." Matt doesn't sound too worried.
"Besides, I have faith in the marvels of modern medicine. What's a root canal compared to digging a bullet out?"

"At least it's better than smoking." Near wrinkles his nose, and Gevanni drops his coffee. Did Near just make a joke? Both geniuses glance over at him, with narrowed eyes, then dismiss him in a way that just sets his hair on end.

"At least it's better than almost never eating at all. You take in less than a bird."

Near sniffs, and Gevanni looks around for something to wipe up the coffee with.

"You're at least taking vitamins?"

Near shakes his head, and Gevanni makes a note to get some, because Matt's probably right about that. Matt's eyes follow him as he leaves the room, from behind his goggles.

"I love that he hates me."

"You would," Near replies. It's his second joke in as many minutes. Even Matt looks surprised at him, but not unpleasantly so.

It's being L. Being N, rather. It's made him different. He likes it. He's *happy* doing this, solving these puzzles, playing this game

The next morning Near has a bottle of vitamins on his desk, and Matt has a cup of toothpicks on his.

In his dream, Near says to Matt, 'I know you wish I were him. I know I wish he had survived and I had died, and that if you could have us trade places, you would.' In his dream he is brave enough to say it, which is something, because Near is never one to say any of it.

In his dream, Matt replies, 'No, it's alright,' and 'I forgive you' and then he reaches out...

Near wakes up, wide eyed and jumping like he's been electrocuted. He pulls his cotton clothes on and pads to the bookshelf, and finds his Dostoevsky. Time to lose himself in someone else's dreams.

L never sleeps well. N is no different. He'll have dark circles etched in permanently in a month or two.

In the morning, Matt says, "hey, do I get a salary?"

Near blinks at him and steals one of his toothpicks to give to the leader of the lego army as a weapon. There are fifteen lego people

taking on one small transformer, and the odds are evenly matched, or so the lego people have every reason to think. Near has decided, though, that the transformer is going to win, due to its manoeuvrability.

"If you want." He makes a car sound effect, as the transformation begins. Matt seems unperturbed by his play. As though he's used to it, as though it's just to be expected.

"Eh." Matt is the picture of nonchalance. Near gets the feeling the issue is pretty much dropped. He really would have given Matt a salary if he wanted, though. In his head, he starts calculating the number of cases Matt has helped him on, and how much work he put in to each of them.

He doesn't have unlimited funds; right now, they're working off money from the governments they help, and from Interpol and various other less-known realization. Not to mention work for private, wealthy clients. If they complete a few more jobs successfully, those less about justice and more about money, then he'll be able to pursue the crimes *he* wants to.

L might never have stooped as low as this, but Near is not L.

Near has a very good memory. It doesn't take long until he has an exact dollar value for what he 'owes' Matt so far, and he'll keep a running tally. If Matt accepts it, it's something he can give him when he decides to make off on his own.

He sometimes wonders what L would think of him. At the orphanage, L called him too hasty, but would also smile at him and bring him puzzles. He would ruffle Near's hair (like Matt does now, and Near finally connects the feeling of contentedness with a belated snap) and offer him the strawberry off the top of his cheesecake.

Near was never as smart as L, and was smart enough to know it, too. If he ever wrote a book of his own, it would be about the

frustrations of knowing your own weaknesses.

He needed Mello to surpass L, to avenge him. Mello needed Matt. The three of them made it possible, made it work, and now the three are down to two. So in his own way, Near feels Mello's loss as keenly as Matt does; without him, Near will always be N, and never L.

He dreams again, this time of Mello, reaching out a leather gloved hand to him and asking, with a sneer, if he'd like him to take Matt's place. If *Near* would rather engage in his own little swap out.

He wakes up in a cold sweat, and climbs out of bed at once. It's four am, and Matt is at the computer. The hair on one side of his head is flattened, and sticking out on the other side, subtly, like he ran his fingers through it some but didn't shower.

He probably had a nightmare too.

Near joins him soundlessly, Matt reaches for a toothpick, without comment, and they both get back to work.

They walk together through Dubai, one of Matt's hands on his gun, the other on his side, willing it to stop aching. Near watches Matt surreptitiously, and keeps his hands in his pockets. He keeps his head lowered, and in between watching Matt, he watches everything around them. They haven't come this far to go to a knife between the ribs.

Matt asked Near last night what could possibly be more glorious than what had almost got him. Near just glared at him.

L's old contact lives in a shady building in a shady part of town, which is perfect, because that's what he's here for, is to provide information about the underground goings on. He's old enough that he's been in the employ of two separate L's already. He knew Mr Wammy personally.

Near wants to meet him personally. To judge him, personally. L had Wedy and Aiber, both deceased, probably at Kira's hands. Near will have Rodgers. Rodgers, who tells everyone his first name is Darwin, but is really a Jonathan.

Near is hardly one to complain about fake names. He lets it be.

Darwin Rodgers is an old man who wheezes and laughs, and offers them both cigarettes. Matt accepts one, and Near doesn't.

"You must be Mello," Darwin says to Matt, "L talked about you."

"I'm not, actually," Matt replies, firm and kind of tired sounding, "I'm just along for the ride." He's matter-of-fact and composed, and if Near didn't know that there was grief in there, somewhere, he probably wouldn't have been able to tell.

"Sorry," says Darwin, because apparently he can see it too. Maybe it's just Near that can't read Matt any more.

"Peachy-keen jelly bean," Matt replies, and then takes a drag, "let's get down to business."

Isn't Near supposed to be the unemotional one?

Aside from that, it goes smoothly, except that Near has cigarette smoke in his hair and is quite upset by the time he leaves, for no particular reason. He knows Matt can tell, and that no other human being would be able to. Not Hal, not Gevanni, not Ridner, not L, if he was still alive.

Alright, *maybe* L. But L is dead, and now there's just Matt, who's under his skin, who's a splinter in his brain, who is making him emotional, ergo ineffective and whose presence can therefore no longer be tolerated.

His thoughts are chasing themselves in circles. Darwin Rodger's hacking laugh is in his ears. He drops Matt off at a hotel room with a

credit card, with no explanations, and is on a plane an hour later.

--AN- I am far from satisfied with this, but I have twisted and turned it and poked it in so many different directions that I'm starting to get flashes of dread whenever I open the word document, so it's time to cut the umbilical and chuck it on up. Near is hard to write, because I have such a specific vision of how he thinks and I never *quite* feel like it's coming through.

Next chapter will hopefully be better. Thanks for all the reviews! You feed my self confidence deliciously.

Tom Robbins

Matt, fucking idiot that he is, doesn't figure out that Near isn't coming back to drag him out of the hotel in Dubai and back into their adventures as Batman and Robin until he hears about a string of murders that have stopped in Ireland. He knows it was where they were going next, he knows it means Near has gone on without him.

He breaks a coffee cup against the wall, and leaves without paying, out of spite.

It's easy to get to airports, even if you don't know the language. It's harder, arriving in an airport, realizing you're passport-less and *fucked*, and having to go back to the hotel to begin with to find out your passport is in the envelope left at the desk, and that you're going to have to pay for your stay after all.

He flies to Japan, where he gets a new passport. He flies, with it, and the name 'Bernard M. Wrangle' to England, and then to New York, because when you have nowhere to go New York will probably have *something* for you.

Several popular showtunes said as much, and if you couldn't believe what they told you on Broadway, then what could you stand by in this mad, mad world?

Near had at least got him used to airplane rides. He can thank the cowardly little shit for that, at least.

Mello's old mafia contacts welcome him in with open arms. There are almost none of them left, after the explosions and Kira and betrayals and whatnot, but when he says 'I'm the hacker Mello would go to' eyes widen in respect, most everywhere.

It's kind of a heady feeling. He considers going all badass and dressing in leather, like Mello did, but he's twenty and doesn't need to stretch to be taken seriously, not like some punk fourteen year old with an axe to grind and a reputation to earn.

He buys a gun and starts practising with it practically religiously, because it is not a safe world that he's stepping in to. He smokes two packs of cigarettes and then decides that since he was as good as quit, he might as well save the money. That lasts a month, then he picks up a pack of camels, because a) they're the best friends you can have in prison and b) he's got to die *somehow*, and he's already survived bullets.

At first, he's pretty sure he's content. Except for missing Mello. But it's worse than that, so he decides he must be missing Near, too, and wallows in the self pity of that one for a bit. He picks up something to smoke a *lot* stronger than cigarettes and a lot less legal, and in a dazed, marijuana-mellow moment realizes that no, he isn't missing Mello or Near, he just really, legitimately doesn't like New York.

He's always drunk or stoned when he comes to these sorts of realizations. He is not *quite* gone enough to try to get a-hold of Near, for which he is grateful; if there was ever a person not to drunk dial, it was Near.

Next morning, he leaves the mafia, and still as Bernard Wrangle buys a car and some drugs and some booze, and throws everything into it and heads down in the direction of Mexico as fast as is mechanically possible on four wheels.

In darker moments, when he's feeling really sorry for himself, he tells strangers in bars about always being left behind by the person one rung above him on the ladder.

Eventually, he trains himself out of it. Girls will flirt with a sad-eyed drunk to a point, and then they just lose interest. It's a fine line,

between mysterious and pathetic, and Arizona tequila and Missouri bourbon teach him to walk in gracefully.

He reads papers as he goes, and solves all the crimes in them, and all the crossword puzzles. He doesn't tell anyone, no benevolent phone calls for local police departments. Justice can go fuck itself, Matt is sick and tired of being it's bitch.

One night, he's debating underlying themes in Gogol in a campus bar when he sees someone with white curls and thinks that it might be Near for a crazy, crazy second, but obviously it isn't.

Eventually he does give up and track down Near. It's easy, knowing the system like he does, he manages it out of an internet cafe. He gets the phone ringing there and when Gevanni answers it and won't put Near on, screams at him until he's dragged out of the cafe into the street, still shouting.

It's not Gevanni's fault, that he's protective of Near. Matt would be, too. Matt was, until he was shown first hand what a conniving little grass snake the kid could be.

He doesn't mean that. But he drinks until he can pretend that he does, because that's a lot less complicated than something as bleak as forgiveness.

Out of spite, he hacks Near's computers and replaces several police reports with porn. It's immature, but he's drunk, and it makes him feel marginally better about the world to think of Near as irritated and embarrassed, and trying not to show it to Rester or Gevanni.

He's always angriest when he's hurt.

Someone tries to knife him one night, in a back alley that he knew better than to walk through, and he breaks their arm in three places. Mello's usually the ruthless one, but Mello isn't here any more, so it's

Matt's job to take care of himself in all the ways that Mello used to do for him.

He takes no pleasure in it, though, or at least, he pretends not to. Maybe there's some small satisfaction at he success; I can do something on my own. But the sound of the snapple-popping bone and the sick, fleshy creak under his hands made him sick to his stomach. More than the tequila ever could.

The police arrive and he watches from the roof of a nearby building to make sure they get the guy into a car and then takes off in the other direction to find something else to do. To find some more trouble to start. Another black alley to walk through that he shouldn't.

But he is more careful, now. The goal of all this isn't to get anyone else hurt. He couldn't tell you for certain what the goal was, but it certainly wasn't that. He's always played more to the tune of the masochist.

That's probably why he was such good friends with Mello, in retrospect. It kind of made him think of the scene with the dentist in Little Shop of Horrors, and if that was the case, would Near by the talking plant? That would be far, far too funny.

He shouldn't be laughing, he just broke someone's arm, but he is and it can't be helped.

Mexico gets boring after a few months, so he hops onto another plane, this one to Hungary. There's a bleached-blond girl a few seats in front of him who keeps giving him little jolts of anger when he sees the near-white out of the corner of his eye.

At least he isn't thinking about Mello, every second of every day, any more. (Just every third, every fourth.) It takes a while for him to figure out what that probably means.

He kind of feels like he should maybe feel a little bit guilty, for replacing his best friend with said best friend's worst enemy, or at least, arch-nemesis, but Mello always thought it was funny, Matt's habit of falling too far too quickly.

Shit, did he just *think* that?

Hungary is a blur of vodka and newspapers. He starts seriously trying to track Near down, so he can find him and give him a piece of his mind.

It isn't that Near 'fucked and chucked' him, obviously, because nothing like that ever happened. He wouldn't have minded if he had, probably, because if you have sex then at least you've laid something on the table, you've put something out there, but nothing that happened between them was remotely sexual. They hardly even touched... although in retrospect, Matt's prepared to bet big money that there was something like it behind those quick little smiles.

The thought only makes him angrier. Because that was kind of the problem. Near never put anything out there, never said, never even hinted. It might have all been some figment of Matt's imagination.

But if it wasn't, if Near left him behind, friendless and still fucking unable to walk all that well, with nowhere to go and nothing to do, just because he was having some sort of sexuality crisis then Matt is going to kick his ass so hard his cousin will fall down.

Not that he can't take care of himself, but that's so very much not the point. It's not like Near had any duty to keep him around, either, but he had been pulling his weight. He had deserved at least a little warning, or some chance to make a change.

'Fucking little freak,' he imagines Mello saying it, all vitriol and frustration, and it doesn't sound right. He's still caught on that zipline between anger and betrayal, Mello's eyes and Near's composure.

Would tracking him down even make a difference? Matt isn't sure he wants to be in the same room as him right now. He isn't sure he *could* without taking a swing at him, and then Gevanni would shoot his ass and he has had more, more than enough of bullets and hospital stays to last him a lifetime.

It'd just be disgusting, to survive killing Kira, God of the New World, only to be taken down for bitchslapping Near.

For his birthday, Matt gets himself a night in a good hotel and a good bottle of vodka and a sitting in the middle of the expansive bed, picks up the phone.

"Hello?"

"Darwin, darling, long time no speak."

He hears the sound of a cigarette being lit, and considers buying a pack, but he almost never misses it any more so there's not really any point, is there?

"Matt, right? What can I do for you?"

"I need to get in touch with N. What can you do for me?"

He gets a phone number for his troubles (and for the tune of ten thousand dollars, which seems like a very reasonable price to him) that Darwin calls just in case, and that Near can be trusted to answer. Matt writes it down and swears that he'll use it in the morning, he will, he really will.

As soon as he can figure out what the hell to say to someone who broke promises he never made and took advantage by never hinting at anything remotely inappropriate. As soon as he can figure out exactly how much right to be angry he has.

None, he already knows, he owes Near his life. Near saved him, Near lost Mello, his great chance at fame and success, and Matt doesn't owe him a single fucking thing, no matter what he pretends. He can't call him up and scream at him, he has no right.

That doesn't mean he isn't going to *try*. What sort of person would he be if he gave up?

Maybe he'd have a few less bullet holes him, but that couldn't be helped. He wouldn't change for the world.

Not for the world, and certainly not for stupid little cowardly Near.

He feels himself winding tighter and tighter, like a clockspring. It isn't good, it can't be good. He used to yell at Mello when he got like this, and drag him out to gun shops and clubs and dark fields, where they'd run and whoop and scream, and play predator-prey until their lungs were burning and the morning dawn turned Mello's hair into a fiery halo.

Then, they'd collapse on the ground, and Matt wouldn't smoke and Mello wouldn't reach for his chocolate. They'd chew on grass and laugh about the time L came to the orphanage and organized the Easter Egg hunt all across the grounds, with so much sugar that all the little geniuses went hyperactive and insane for an afternoon and Roger cursed and cursed.

Don't get too wound up. Don't stop thinking, don't give in to instinct, to emotion.

Somehow, it's easy advice to give, and difficult advice to follow.

"Rodgers." Near's voice, picking up after the second ring. Matt's fingers itch for a cigarette.

This is it.

"Don't hang up, Near."

He puts as much command into it as possible. If Near slams the phone down now than it's all for nothing, his trace won't go through, the conversation will be over, Near will be on the run and Matt will never stand a chance of catching up to him.

He waits the silence out, counting backwards from ten, once and then again, and finally when he thinks that it's all done with, Near speaks.

"Are you in trouble?"

Well, it's good of him to ask. Matt considers lying, saying that the mafia is chasing him and he needs out, now, but Near would figure it out in no time and he'd be out on his ass before he could say 'desperate.'

"No, I'm good. Peachy keen, jellybean." Near laughs, and it sounds strained. Matt's glad to hear the sound, though.

"I just wanted to talk."

"This line isn't secure." Near can sound frightfully cold, when he wants to, and uncompromising. "We need to hang up."

"Oh." His chest constricts. That probably came out more sad sounding than he meant it to, but that obviously counted for something, because he can still hear Near on the other end. He's probably twirling a finger in his hair right now, the little freak.

"I'll call you back. Give me an hour or so. Stay by your phone. Well then."

Now, the line dies. All Matt can do is hang up and hope that Near's good for his word. Not like he has any other choice, does he?

He paces for a minute and then decides he can't keep that up, his leg is aching. He reads for four minutes, and can't keep that up

either, he's too twitchy, he keeps losing his place on the page. He turns on the television and flicks channels until he finds Silence of the Lambs, but that's far too morbid to even contemplate right now, unfortunately.

He'd drink, but he wants a clear head. He'd shower, but he might miss the ringing. He'd order room service, but he's ridiculously nervous. So he goes back to pacing, and when that fails, to reading, and when that fails, to the movie.

Anthony Hopkins is a creepy, creepy man. He goes back to pacing.

Rinse, wash, repeat. He's folding down the corner of his book when the phone finally rings, and he drops it in his haste to grab the receiver.

"Yeah?"

"Matt." Near's voice, cool and composed, sweet and eminently reasonable, and hiding just about everything. Matt swallows, because his throat is dry. Near clears his, on the other end of the line.

"You're in Budapest, yes?"

--AN: I feel I should mention the inspiration for this. I was in a sociology lecture, wondering idly what the death note cast might read, and I decided that Matt was a Tom Robbins, Kurt Vonnegut, Douglas Adams kind of guy. I then decided that Near's favourite book was likely Crime and Punishment, and that he was also very fond of Gogol and Kafka, and that he was sick and tired of getting picture books for Christmas, because he might have an imagination but he is not STUPID.

Franz Kafka

Near is waiting for Matt on the front steps of Saint Stephen's Basilica, and although Near knew he would be coming he feels an unaccountable stab of nervousness when he sees the familiar red hair, and the shine of the sunlight on his goggles. He doesn't close his book, he can let Matt find him. It's not like he's exactly blending into the crowd.

Matt stands in front of him, a moment later, smoking angrily, and Near clears his throat before looking up.

"I thought you had quit."

"I thought you weren't a fucking douchebag."

Near fights the urge to laugh, because Matt looks seriously angry at him and it would be best not to be hit. Gevanni would probably kill him, and Near has spent a lot of time making sure Matt came through this alive.

"Let's go somewhere quieter." A mob of asian tourists is coming up the stairs, and he has no intention of being trampled. Also, he's never been entirely comfortable out in big crowds.

"Yeah," says Matt, casting his cigarette butt on the ground and grinding it out with the heel of his boot. "Might as well. Come on then. Coffee. You're buying."

Matt is mercifully silent the way there, and Near walks practically in his shadow through the busy streets. It's a little loud, a little cluttered for his tastes. Matt seems to understand, and doesn't elbow him away.

He probably shouldn't have chosen to meet him in a church. The stained glass reminded him of Wammy's, and the women with their

clicking beads reminded him of Mello.

He tries to remember if he ever saw Mello praying the rosary. Surely he must have. Mello was loud and frivolous and liked to present a 'fuck you' attitude, and maybe wearing the beads out on top of the leather was part of what he wanted everyone to see, they must have been a part of him, too. The first thing his hand would reach for on the bedside table every morning.

So he must have cared for the meaning behind them, and if that was the case, he must have sometimes prayed. Maybe not the whole thing, because it could take a long time to pray the rosary, and Mello had the patience of a coiled serpent when it came to plans and games and attacks, but Near can't imagine him sitting, saying so many words.

He tries to remember if he knows the words to the prayers himself.

He doesn't, but he always was an atheist, so that's alright. No one will ever expect him to.

"So," says Matt, stirring sugar into his coffee. Near takes his black, but is letting it cool, not drinking yet. "Way to fucking *abandon me*, Near."

He wants to argue that 'abandon' is a horrible word, and a strong word, and that you aren't abandoned when you're left in a hotel room with money, you're abandoned when you're on the streets by yourself in a city you don't know without food or water or a single idea what to do.

He suspects it would be ungracious to quibble over semantics, in this case. Matt still apparently picks up on some of his dubiousness, and snorts as he pours another cream into his cup.

"Whatever. You could have at least said something. I was waiting for you."

Rather than concede the point, Near watches him take another sip, and then reach for another packet of sugar.

"You're more like L than you think you are," he says, as Matt continues to doctor his drink. The other boy frowns, and puts the sugar down, as if that made any difference now. All that'll do is keep him from really enjoying his coffee.

"Are you listening to anything I'm saying?"

His voice is tight and frustrated. Near recognizes it as the one people use when he isn't grasping something they want him to. When there's some emotion he's supposed to be feeling, some norm he's failed to internalize, when he's behaving oddly. Like staring at strangers in the elevator instead of looking up at the numbers like a good little passenger.

As though the numbers ever did anything but count up and down.

Right, he's supposed to be assuaging Matt's wounded pride.

"I knew you'd be alright."

Matt had taken his goggles off when they stepped into the coffee shop. It was unlike him, and Near kind of wishes he hadn't, there would be a better excuse to not make eye contact.

"I wasn't."

He wants to argue that, because Matt is here and not bleeding, but he suspects that he isn't speaking entirely literally any more. So he closes his eyes and lowers his head a little and goes for the conversational life raft.

"I shouldn't have. I'm sorry."

There, he's said it.

That should help, shouldn't it?

"Fuck you, Near."

Or perhaps not.

"I really thought you would be alright," he says again, aware that he sounds faintly like he's sulking. It's good that Matt's angry with him.

"Well, like I said, you were wrong. I'm getting really sick of being left behind." He says this with an uncustomary gravity that makes Near look up. Matt's eyes are boring into his, narrowed and practically *burning*.

"I don't do this touchy feely shit, so pay attention, okay whizkid? I'm only saying this once." From the sounds of things, Near is going to wish he'd never said it at all, but that can't be helped now. "I mean it. I'm really, really done with being left behind. So if you're going to, you know, *die* or run away again, tell me right now."

Near's head fills up with Matt's Canadian father, and Mello running off when they were fourteen, and L dying, and Mello's burning body (did he ever tell Matt how Mello died?) and Darwin Rodgers laughing in Dubai. Matt's body full of bullets for someone else's crusade.

"You can stay," he says, helplessly, and knows it's true. It may not be logical and it may not be right, and he may become a worse detective for it and it may hurt like hell already and be even worse minute by minute, but Matt's asking him to, so he will.

He even makes good on his word and pays for the coffee.

Budapest is full of panoramic view points and vantages. Matt has been staying in the city long enough to have found one or two, so he takes Near to the closest one, clutching a small bag with two apple danishes in it.

Near has never done touristy things, and he has to admit, it's kind of enjoyable, just for it's novelty. Matt keeps him clear of the more

aggressive street vendors, and Near is content to let his mind wander into imaginary scenarios. He sees a Gundam perched on top of the old fashioned castle, watching a dinosaur forge through the streets, carefully avoiding stepping on the people. A space ship jets through the sky above them.

Matt settles down on a bench and pats the seat next to him, reminding Near grimly that his world is interesting enough right now without playing pretend, and he should probably be paying more attention.

"Well," he says nervously, joining him as requested, but Matt cuts him off.

"So what was that?" Near doesn't need to ask what he's referring to.

"I'm not-" and he trails off, searching for the words. There's no delicate way to explain this, especially since he's not entirely sure how much he wants Matt to understand to begin with, and how much he'll guess on his own.

"I'm not... An alien. Angry. Human. Gay. Going to tell you. A trekkie." Matt's voice is light, and just snide enough to be irritating.

"Mello," Near says, uncompromisingly and he knows, he knows it's not kind and that it isn't Matt's fault, but this will get the results he wants and L taught him to be ruthless. Matt knows it; they all learned that lesson. "I'm not Mello."

"No *shit* Sherlock," says Matt, and reaches out to ruffle his hair, despite the fact that Near's eyes are at their coldest and he's practically spitting nails. The gesture eases some of the tension out of him, although Near is very aware that it should do the opposite. He has no business feeling comforted by Matt's proximity.

Matt isn't making this any easier, but then, Matt doesn't really owe him anything.

They've been sitting for about half an hour in silence, watching the afternoon go by, when Matt confesses, suddenly,

"I have this recurring dream where I'm leaking. Like, I take a drink and it starts pouring out, here," pressing two fingers to his abdomen, "and here," his upper chest, "and so on." That's where his bullet holes were, Near remembers.

"Dreams are illogical things," he says, trying to take the words to heart. He dreams about Matt sometimes, and it holds him hostage.

"So's life, though," Matt complains, "I mean, books that kill people fall out of the sky."

Near shrugs.

"I had those burned."

"That's not what I'm worried about," Matt says, and Near doesn't want to know what he's about to say. "It's just, if that's possible, then what else is out there we didn't know about?"

How do you eliminate the impossible, to find the improbable truth when you no longer have rules for what is possible and what is not?

(When Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from troubled dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a monstrous insect.)

"Oh well," he says, quietly, and reaches for the danishes, "we do what we can."

Matt laughs at him and ruffles his hair again, and Near feels sick.

The sight of pigeons in the park, and the sweet pastries remind Near forcibly of L. Before the Kira case, he would come to the orphanage and sometimes sit outside on the bench, curled up and barefoot, and feed the pigeons there.

All the children would cluster in their windows and watch, rapturously, quietly, as though he wasn't perfectly aware that they were there. They all wondered why he did it.

Mello got up the courage to ask, and Near thinks he told Matt what L said, but whatever it was, Near certainly never found out.

"Hey," says Matt, and Near blinks and licks the crumbs of the pastry off his fingers, "what's the deal with you anyways?"

"What?" he asks, not entirely sure he understands the question. Pretty damn positive, in fact, that he has no idea whatsoever.

"There's always been gossip. But you never really talked to anyone. I don't even know where you're from."

"You read my file," he says, "don't pretend otherwise." The file is full of his own lies, and Matt rolls his eyes accordingly, because he's smart enough to spot it when he sees it. He crumples up the paper bag that held the pastries and chucks it at the nearest garbage pail.

His fingers drum on his knee. Near can tell by looking at him that he's craving a cigarette but isn't reaching for one.

"New Jersey," he says, a minute or two later, like it's a non-sequitur. It isn't.

"Seriously?" Matt sounds incredulous. Near isn't sure why, so he shrugs.

"Jesus. I pictured something crazily dramatic. So, um..."

"I don't want to talk about it," Near bites in, with a vehemence that surprises himself. He's nineteen and prides himself on his rationality, you would think it wouldn't matter any more.

Matt gets the message and doesn't push.

It would have been easier if he had. Then Near could be angry and tell him to get lost. It would have been better for both of them, but now they're just stuck, aren't they?

Once, when they were little, and Mello was angry enough to throw a punch, because Near had been goading him steadily all afternoon, Matt interceded. He put a hand on Mello's shoulder, tucked his gameboy into his pocket, and said, with a light little shrug,

"Dude. Not worth it."

Now, this meant something. Near had completely understood what he was doing, and had calculated the likelihood of Mello attacking him and how long it would take a teacher to find them and exactly what the punishment for Mello would be, and had deemed it to be well worth it.

Matt had thrown all of that for a loop, with four easy words. Mello had stormed off.

Near had crept off to his room, surprised, and surprisingly *stung*, by the whole thing too. When he was six, it was heady, to be able to provoke that sort of reaction. To know how to pull people whichever way he wanted.

He had much better puppets these days, but he was still sometimes aware that Matt had a pair of scissors, and so was someone for a puppeteer to be careful of.

"So where are we going?" Matt asks, as Near hails a cab. He names the hotel, but Matt shakes his head, for some reason.

"I mean, where like cases. Where's our next work. I am helping you again, in case you were wondering." He says this like Near gets no say in it, which isn't surprising. That's been the tune of the afternoon.

"Oh," Near has to think for a moment. He hadn't actually decided. But now it's obvious, they need to get moving right away. He might be utterly pathetic when it comes to dealing with people (or rather, Matt, because he was nowhere near this clumsy when it came to anyone else) but he was a good detective.

And he really needed to feel competent at something, as soon as possible, too.

"Yablochnoye."

"That's in the Ukraine," Matt observes.

"It is." Near tries to remember if anything important has ever happened in Yablochnoye before. Nothing comes to mind, but strange things happen everywhere. He was an improbably little street kid in New Jersey, for a while, after all.

"Cool."

In the car, on the way home, Near bites his bottom lip to keep words in. Mostly because he doesn't know how they'd come out, and he doesn't babble. He knows how every sentence is going to end before he speaks it. Each thought is always full articulated.

'I didn't want to leave you behind' he wants to say, and then Matt will ask 'then why did you?' and Near will not have an answer for him.

'I'm glad you're back,' he might say instead, and Matt can answer 'I didn't want to go to begin with' and that's the same scenario as before.

'I think I might...' and he isn't sure how he'd even end that one. A cloud of pigeons flies up as a small child dashes towards them. Near rolls down the window a little to let the cool air into the car, and imagines L's voice, or Matt's, saying 'check mate.'

Only in this kind of game, when you've lost you don't just start over. The pieces aren't simply lined back up again, there is no 'best two out of three,' as Mello would have said. You *stay* lost.

"Why do you even *want* to follow me?"

He didn't really mean to say that out loud. Near very seldom asks questions that he doesn't know the answer to. It's altogether too risky. Questions are things to trap people into committing to something, or to see what they *want* you to think, not what they really do.

"Don't be a dick." Matt looks over at him, and Near blinks, but doesn't back down. In for a penny, in for a pound, again, like Mello used to say.

"You're all I've got left," Matt finally says, "so shut up and deal with it, okay?"

Near shuts up.

--AN: woot! I should totally have been working more on my world lit final rather than this... although both of them involved Kafka? So it kind of counts? Ish?

Nikolai Gogol

Matt always said, 'live and let live.'

Mello always said, 'I'm going to fucking *kill* you.'

Near never said much at all.

He got the best grades of the three of them, so maybe silence is golden. Matt isn't sure if he thinks Near is better off for being the best, or worse. On the one hand, he is a shiny super genius whose thoughts move so quickly that Matt has to scramble to keep up. On the other hand, he has the social skills of a potted fern.

That's actually being really unkind to the fern.

And it's not cute, and it's not harmless, either, because how are you supposed to flirt with someone who barely looks past their own nose? Near probably doesn't even know what sex is. No, that's wrong, he probably knows about it and how it influences crime rates and the various pathologies of sexual predators. He's probably analysed countless situations and motives and relationships gone bloodily wrong.

Matt is betting that Near has, at one point or another, used the word 'irrelevant,' to describe it, though.

Because Matt is not the plucky heroine, nor is he sure he knows best, nor is he particularly sure of *himself*, at the best of times, he does what any normal person would do in these circumstances.

He gives up.

"Yablachnoye," says Matt, snapping his fingers suddenly as the jeep pulls in the small driveway. The hotel is more of an inn, really, tiny

and cramped looking, and one of the biggest for a long ways around.
"Now I remember!"

"What?" asks Near, sounding distant, but not entirely uninterested, which is kind of him, Matt supposes. He knows he can sometimes born.

"Yablachnoye is where Andrei Chikatilo was born. The Rostov Ripper."

"Who?" asks Gevanni, from the front seat. Rester climbs out to go check in with the front desk. They know the drill; they wait in the car until he's certain they have a room, and when he returns, Matt and Near move quickly inside. The fewer people who see them the better.

"A serial killer," Near says, curtly, and Matt rolls his eyes.

"Not just a serial killer. Hannibal Lecter was based off him. Crazy stuff. I think he had a body count of fifty two."

"We're not here chasing a serial killer, are we?" asks Gevanni, nervously. Matt can't blame him; he wouldn't like to meet Hannibal Lecter, either. That's more Mello's poison than his, he just hacks things.

"No, we're not," says Near, in the tone of one who means 'oh *please*,' but is far too bored to even let it colour their voice. Matt grins at him. He has passive aggressive down to a fine art, and it's kind of a pleasure to witness sometimes.

In the front seat, Gevanni's shoulders sag in relief.

"The odds of it being a serial killer are slim to none. There are only three bodies, so far."

Gevanni tenses right back up again and Matt has to bite down hard on the sleeve of his sweater to avoid snickering out loud and giving

the agent yet another reason to hate him. And people said Near didn't have a sense of humour.

The first time Matt got drunk, it was off vodka. He was fifteen and it was, unsurprisingly, Mello's fault. He's been much more careful with the stuff since, but when he sees the pictures of the dead bodies, it becomes a little too much and he takes the shot Rester pours him with a surprised little smile.

Near shakes his head 'no,' to the drink, and peers closer at the pictures with a dispassionate expression. Matt wonders if it'll give him nightmares, and then wonders again if it's a blessing or a curse, being who and what Near is.

He wouldn't trade places with him for the world.

Near had wondered, earlier, if he had ever told Matt how Mello died. He hadn't. Matt hacked into the reports of the entire Kira case before Near dropped his ass, and read it for himself. Rester found him at it, and put a big hand on his shoulder.

"Oh, fuck off," says Matt, "he killed your people, and I don't need you to pretend for me."

False sympathy is almost as disgusting as processed cheese. Both make him want to be sick, and neither of them have anything to do with what they're pretending to be.

"What I thought of him doesn't matter," Rester says. His fingers tighten, and Matt feels very much like a kitten being shaken by the scruff of his neck. It's so hard, to remember that even though they're the best and the brightest, adults can sometimes one up them based on sheer life experience.

If a Wammy genius ever lived past forty, they could probably rule the world. In fact, he thinks a few of them have come pretty close. He's

heard rumours about the origins of some of those politicians.

Rester continues,

"He was your comrade. You were close. Everyone knows that that hurts."

"We aren't everyone, Rester." That hand is getting so very, very heavy. "If you go this expecting me and Near to be 'everyone' you're in for a big surprise, of the 'it's all fun and games until someone loses an eye' variety."

Given that Rester just laughed at that, and walked off, Matt is pretty sure he wasn't taken entirely seriously. Which is a shame.

Because it's true.

Near turns twenty the night they spend on the phone with the police, double checking the arrangements of the *second* most famous Yablachnoye killer's custody. Matt forgets about it, and so does Rester and Gevanni, and Near is very glad that it's so.

Matt has the wildest dream ever.

There's a small creature in the sink. It's arms and legs are tentacles, it's head is too big for it's body, and it has a myriad of little fangs. It asks him for help, and he's brave enough to pick it up, and it doesn't bite him.

L informs him, (though Matt isn't sure how) that he needs to get it to safety. Suddenly, he and the creature he's holding are in the middle of a fair. The creature shrieks in fright and hides it's face in the crook of his arm.

It's a challenge to find his way out. The world is spinning and people are trying to win prizes by throwing darts, which keep going astray.

The entire fair is on the edge of a huge cliff, by the sea, which he's in danger of slipping off every time he gets too near the edge.

Suddenly, Mello grabs the arm that isn't holding the creature. He hands Matt a scarf, and tells him that he has to wear it around his head, because someone has recognized him. He puts it on for him, with his fingers brushing Matt's cheeks. Somehow, without being told, Matt understands that if he isn't wearing the scarf, that the person who's looking will be able to see him through the air. It makes perfect sense at the time.

Mello tells him that besides getting out of the fair, he also has to pick up candy for L on the way. That part's very important.

Next to the doorway, there's this thing shaped like an ice-cooler, the kind outside of gas stations. It's full of gigantic gumdrops and gobstoppers, but it takes two hands to operate, so he'll have to put the creature down to open it. Except it's not a creature any more, somewhere over the afternoon it's become Near, who's small enough for him to hold in one arm, somehow, but still himself.

He sets Near, who's only about a foot tall, on the ground, and can't tell if he's even alive or not. Then he goes in to the cooler to get the candy for L, fills up a bag, pulls his head out of it and looks down.

Near isn't there any more. Someone's taken him.

The arrival of the stewardess in the aisle, offering them breakfast from her little cart is what wakes him up. He sits up, blearily, and rubs at his neck, ignoring the strange look Near is giving him from the airplane seat next to him.

"Are you alright?" Near finally asks, as he tears open the plastic packaging around his meal.

"Fine," lies Matt, smoothly. "I'm fine."

This is ridiculous.

"Drug trafficking?" Lester looks concerned, glancing through the files. "Near, these are dangerous people."

"I know this one," says Matt, and everyone turns to look at him. He blinks at them.

"What? Did you think I was really all that law abiding? I know him. I can get him to flip if you need a witness in court. I crashed at his place for a while last... well. He's kind of disillusioned with the whole racket in general."

"Thank you, Matt," says Near, a little coldly, Matt thinks, "we will bear that in mind."

"Sure," he replies, trying not to sound resentful, and lights a cigarette.

"Got your nose," he says to Near, pinching it and then putting his thumb behind his index finger, like it's trapped in his hand. Near gives him an irritated look that completely lacks conviction, and then a helpless little smile that makes Matt wonder if maybe he gave up too early.

Maybe it's the anxiety about the drug case. It isn't going well. Bodies are piling up, as bosses respond to outside pressure and hastily make it known what happens to those who contemplate breaking ranks.

He starts dreaming again.

He dreams again, that he's back at Wammy's, and there are things taking over. They're giant pairs of scissors that walk about on the points of the blades, and stab through children when they catch them. To avoid them you need to run away, or be very, very silent and not even breathe as they go by. They end up, him Mello, Near

and L, on the roof of the library with only a slim bridge between them and the next building and the scissors behind them.

L tries it first, to see if it's safe. It isn't, he falls down thousands and thousands of stories, leaving Mello, Matt and Near behind. They clamber down the wall, all awkward and terrible, and finally make it, and then get into a locked building somehow. They're safe (ish) there until nightfall, when they make a break for the harbour.

There wasn't a harbour anywhere near Wammy's in real life, but in the dream there is, and he, Mello and Near board a boat that's going to take them to Victoria Island-not only are they near a harbour, they're also apparently in Vancouver.

They make it onto the boat, with dozens of other refugees, because the scissors have turned kind of zombie-esque and taken over the entire mainland, and Mello grins at him and says 'I guess I'm not going to die after all.'

He wakes up and has to remind himself that his friend really is buried, because he'd quite legitimately forgotten there for a few minutes.

"Well then," says Near, sounding privately amused, "the police chief is in on it."

Gevanni and Lester look shocked. Matt just nods; he saw it coming, too.

"Does he know where we're stationed?"

Lester and Gevanni look at each other, and Near frowns and climbs to his feet. This is an eventuality that they're not really prepared for.

Which means they have to move *fast*.

"Down!" yells Gevanni, and Matt feels a hard shove to his shoulder. He hits the hard, warehouse floor as the man behind them draws his weapon. He hears Lester swear, and a muffled gasp, and the sound of two more guns being cocked.

It's only one of them, from the sounds of things, which is kind of insulting, but also very, very relieving because Matt has no interest in being shot *again*. He drags himself to his knees, because he also has no interest in not knowing what's going on.

It's a small guy; wiry and shivery and obviously not really good with the gun he's holding, and full of big eyed terror.

He has an arm tight around Near's neck, and a gun to his temple. Of the two of them, the gunman looks the most frightened. Matt finds this only faintly reassuring.

"Please don't shoot me," says Near, softly, childishly, and the would be assassin shakes him a little, but his resolve has visibly weakened too, so the 'oh poor me,' act is doing something. A few seconds longer, at a small gesture from Near, Gevanni and Rester lower their guns.

"We'll let you go," says Matt, still on his hands and knees, trying to sound frightened himself. Since there's a gun pointed at Near's head, it isn't hard, not at all. Near promised he wasn't going to fuck off on Matt this time, and Matt hopes he knows that this includes being killed in hotel lobbies, with wide eyed desk clerks staring on helplessly.

"Just... please."

It's looking good. The man is backing up. Dragging Near with him, yes, but backing up, as in heading towards the door. He tells Lester and Gevanni to put their guns down, and they do. He lets his grip on Near's neck go, even, and it's all going to be fine.

He shoves him forwards, and Near wobbles a little, maybe, but doesn't fall, and he's almost at the door, shocked eyes and shaking hands, and if he had been three seconds faster, or if the woman coming out of the elevator had been three seconds slower, no one would have been hurt.

He wasn't. She wasn't. She emerged, took in the sight, and screamed. Gevanni swore, the gunman jumped, the trigger was pulled.

Near hits the ground, and unlike Matt, he falls absolutely gracefully. He looks poetic and terrifying, both at once, with big dark eyes and miles of pale hair and skin and cloth, and bright, bright red blossoming out of his upper chest, so fast that Matt can't breathe, spreading across the lobby floor.

God, he thinks, scrambling forwards, even though the rational part of him says it would make more sense to phone nine one one, *if you make him not die, I swear, I'll quit smoking. Cold turkey. Seriously.*

Gevanni, Matt can't remember why he disliked him, goes for the telephone while Rester shoves Matt out of the way and starts doing first aid. Matt's sprawled on the marble lobby floor for the second time in as many minutes, more frightened than he ever was facing down Takeda's body guards or listening to Mello rant and yell, or anything he can begin to think of, even.

"It's his shoulder," says Rester, "I think he'll be fine, but he needs a hospital. Breathe, Matt."

And he hadn't even realized that he'd stopped.

AN: Next chapter will be the last, and will up my self esteem slightly, since the last two have been kind of... meh, directionless, I guess? Possibly lacklustre. I mean you guys have reviewed and liked, but I know I can do much, much better. They were really just build-ups for the next (and last) piece.

If I had less homework, I would have come up with a better structure, since this one was kind of clumsy. I also blame Alphabet for that. The structure notes for that bitch were longer than one of the chapters for this one, and envolved stick figures and other diagrams. It turned out to be worth it, I think, I just don't have it in me to do that again until my midterms and papers are all done/due/over.

Fyodor Dostoevsky

This has been a story about people waking up in hospitals.

Near opens his eyes and immediately wishes he hadn't. His shoulder hurts. His head hurts. He thinks he was *shot*. The inside of his mouth tastes like cotton and the room is too bright.

"Near?" He thinks he recognizes the voice. "Are you alright? How do you feel?"

"Fuck," he says, even though he doesn't swear all that often. If there was ever a time for it, it would appear to be now. He thinks he hears someone laugh, but he just closes his eyes again. It's far easier not thinking right now.

Someone puts a pill in his mouth, and he swallows it, and although the world starts to swim a little, around the edges, his shoulder stops hurting and he finds himself enveloped in a gentle, easy warmth.

When he wakes up the next morning, Matt is passed out in the chair next to his bed. Near peers closer and notices that he might be drooling a little. He's sleeping awkwardly, with his head to one side and his fingers clenched tight. It doesn't look particularly restful.

However, Near feels it would be worse to wake him, so he reaches for the glass of water someone had the foresight to put on his side table. He has the foresight to reach with his un-bandaged arm, but even so, the movement sends a little stab of pain through his shoulder and he gasps.

Matt sits bolt upright, and almost falls out of the chair. Near tries to fight the urge to laugh at him.

He fails, dismally. It's probably the drugs.

Matt looks offended, and then relieved, and then happy. He's laughing too, and Near's shoulder is positively burning every time his shoulder hitches. Matt scrambles over and rescues the glass from his slackening fingers, and sets it to the side with a worried little murmur disguised in a grin.

He calls for a nurse, and Near closes his eyes and puts 'never being shot again' on his list of things to do.

"Matt?" Hospital television and daytime talk shows so vile he can practically feel his soul disintegrating later, Near turns to the boy-man-person in the room with him.

"Yes, Near?"

"I never said it, but I'm very sorry Mello died."

Matt looks like he wants to say, 'yeah, me too,' or 'thanks,' or something. They sit for a moment, and Near flicks the channel, because he has no patience for pop psychology right now.

"I'm quitting smoking," is what Matt eventually comes up with, and Near smiles a little and nods and wishes once in a while he might be able to carry on a conversation with Matt that went the way he expected it to and didn't twist and turn without rhyme or reason along the way.

But if Matt were predictable, he wouldn't be interesting.

By virtue of his position, Near only has to spend one day in the hospital. They wanted to keep him more, but he simply wasn't having that in the slightest. There was only so much work you could get done reading files; his arm hurt too much to really bother with typing on a laptop.

And Matt was probably going bond molecularly with the bedside chair if Near didn't get him out of it sometime soon.

So the next morning, he's being herded by a fiercely protective Lester into a car that he swears looks armoured, and Matt is being similarly dragged by Gevanni, who seems to have forgiven his existence at some point in the last few days.

The door slams uncompromisingly behind them. Lester climbs in the driver's seat, Gevanni rides shotgun.

Matt looks at Near and rolls his eyes, and Near shrugs back and then winces abruptly. Shrugging might not be a great idea right now. This restriction of movement will take some getting used to.

Matt, the conniving bastard that he is, steals a quick, needy, 'touch me' little kiss while Lester and Gevanni have their backs turned. Near wants to kill him and yell at him and beg him to do it again, but he can't because an instant later they've turned back around and are back to discussing travel arrangements.

He isn't alone with Matt at all for the next twenty seven hours, which is how long it takes to get from Ottawa to Bangkok. Once they're finally at the hotel Matt plead jetlag and goes straight to sleep, and Near's mouth is still tingling, he swears.

Working to dismantle illegal child sex trade rings isn't sexy work in the slightest, and Near feels too grimy every night to even consider tracking down Matt and making good on the promise the kiss implied.

Which is for the best, really, because he has a history of being over hasty when it comes to decisions concerning his friend Matt.

Matt pushes him into the washroom on the airplane and cops a feel, and they make out with sticky, awkward, adamant excitement.

Matt slides a hand down Near's cotton pants and then presses a hand over his mouth when he whimpers, and leans over to give him a hickey because he just *has* to.

The stewardess knocks on the door and ushers them back to their seats. Matt, looks flushed and embarrassed, much to Near's delight. He knows that he looks calm as ever. Inside, though, his heart is pounding, but he's had years of practise not admitting nervousness.

Matt and Near are asked never to fly Air Bangkok again. Even Near has to blush a little when Gevanni asks them why.

Lester just looks faintly smug about the whole thing.

They don't talk about it, much less do it, again once they get to England. They're visiting Mello and L's graves, side by side in the little plot by the orphanage. Near imagines that Matt probably wouldn't feel like it was right, so he doesn't push.

He waits by the gate into the cemetery while Matt says what he needs to, to people they both logically know can't hear them, and wonders what he might have believed in if he'd grown up in a normal family. Could he ever have been indoctrinated into some religion or another?

"His rosary was burned, huh?" Matt asks, eventually, rejoining him at the gate. Near nods, because it was, and he'd looked into getting it for Matt, but been unable.

"Let's get inside."

Gevanni looks extremely uncomfortable about the new tension between Matt and Near for the first few days, but Near thinks that's

no more so than he would if Matt or Near were a woman. So it can be borne.

Rester's attitude is far more troublesome. He takes on a very quiet, smug, 'I told you so' kind of aura that makes Matt burst out snickering at random moments and Near can't quite understand, because if *he* couldn't predict this as an outcome, then how could Rester?

He thinks he has a lot to learn about human interactions.

He also has to one-up his chief of staff in some way, because the aura- Rester would never go so far as to *actually* smirk- is just the tiniest bit troublesome.

Eventually, he puts 'water based lubricant' on the shopping list that the agents are in charge of procuring, and makes sure Rester is the one to see it. (It will probably be good to have on hand. Eventually. A very long eventually from now, but better prepared than not, at least.) The blush that stains the man's cheeks more than makes up for the attitude.

He feels like Mello might have been proud of him.

He'd had to fight with Roger, to get Mello buried in the plot usually reserved for L's. He'd also never imagined having to (or really being able to) pull rank on the man, but it had nearly come to that.

"But he killed-" Roger had started, sounding frustrated and a little angry, and of course he would be. In his eyes, his student betrayed him.

"Without him, I would have *failed*," Near says, point blank. "If you do not do this, then there will be no point in putting *me* there when I die."

He's actually fairly sure that L- Lawliet-L's grave is empty. Yagami must have had him buried in Japan, and when they got news of his death they put up a marker. He *knows* that all they can get for Mello's grave are a few ashes, given how badly that fire went.

It doesn't matter. It's the acknowledgement that's important.

After a few more moments of a grim head to head, Roger caves to Near's will. Mello will have his place next to his hero.

They leave Wammy's, and get back to work. Their travels take them to Bogota, which is warm and suits Matt's temperament perfectly. He speaks the language and makes Rester find them a hotel with a pool, and spends the whole time wearing next to nothing and trailing little electric touches down the back of Near's neck with his pool-water-damp fingers.

Near will forever consider the scent of chlorine faintly erotic, and will be unsure as to why.

"We should probably..." says Matt, later that night, knocking on Near's door. Near nods, without looking up from his puzzle.

"Woah, can I help? We should probably talk, I was going to say."

"By all means," Near replies, letting Matt choose which question it answers; both of them, really, he hopes he's quick enough to figure that much out.

"Hey," says Matt, out of twenty minutes of puzzle solving.

"Yes?" replies Near, placidly.

"So I really like you."

It's juvenile, and teasing, and so obviously meant to be that even Near can figure out he's supposed to laugh at it.

"Who are you," Matt teases, "and what have you done with Near?"

"I *have* read the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy," he says. Matt gives him an odd look.

"Near. That was almost a year ago."

"Well," he shrugs, and connects another two puzzle pieces, ignoring Matt when he starts snickering.

"If you've been wanting to tell me anything *e*/se for that long, get it off your chest now. I knew you weren't talkative, but Christ on a cracker."

Near connects another puzzle piece, and tries to think about anything else he's been wanting to tell Matt.

Another piece, and a slightly pensive frown crosses his face. There are hundreds of things he could say.

I'm so sorry Mello died, I left you behind, L died.

I'm glad you've stopped smoking, you're alright, you're back

I wish you hadn't been shot, I hadn't been shot, you would mute your gameboy while you play it, you wouldn't pick fights with Gevanni, we could have been friends when we were younger,

I like you too, your goggles, your hair, your hands

I want you to kiss me again.

He feels his frown deepen. There are hundreds of things he could say, and while they sit, he rattles through possible and probable outcomes, and weighs percentages and tries to decipher which he thinks would be best.

Matt makes to sit up and Near glances up sharply. He looks nervous, like he's waiting for some kind of axe to fall, and all Near's calculations and probably outcomes go flying out the window. He lurches forwards, destroying what he's solved of his puzzle so far.

There's some things more important than puzzles, is one thing Mello taught him.

He grabs Matt by the collar of his fleece vest and jerks him forwards too, and the kiss is abrupt and completely unbalanced and over in less than a second because Matt falls over and Near with him, because he wasn't in a stable position to begin with. They land on the puzzle pieces and Near yelps when he hits his shoulder.

"Ow, careful," Matt murmurs, soothing and kind, "we're not in a hurry. And that kind of thing can hurt like a bitch."

"Yours came out of internal organs," Near chides, struggling to sit up or prop himself on his good elbow or something, because he's not precisely comfortable with being sprawled out on the floor in the ruin of his toys. Matt stretches languidly, like a cat, and snakes an arm around him, drawing him back down when he succeeds in sitting up.

It's surprisingly comfortable, settling down against Matt's shoulder.

"I've been thinking about that." Near gives up to Matt's insistent pull and just rests, for a moment. "I never said thanks."

"For what?" He could see himself being lulled into carelessness by the rhythm of Matt's breathing. He doesn't think it's a good idea, though. The ground he's treading is still far too sensitive.

"For saving my life," replies Matt, "I know I would have died if you hadn't..."

"Have you ever read *The Double*?" Near cuts in. He can't bear to hear what Matt has to say, all of a sudden. He isn't even precisely sure why.

"What? By ETA Hoffman?"

"No." He shakes his head, which Matt probably feels more than sees. "By Dostoevsky."

"No. Why?"

Near doesn't have a reason, so he lets a hand roam up Matt's side. Even with the rehabilitation from his injuries, Near can feel the wiry muscles there. Curiously, he slips a hand under Matt's sweater to feel for the scars. He has their locations memorized, even though he's never seen them once.

Matt groans softly, and Near feels a surge of nervous triumph rise in his chest.

"I'll lend it to you."

"Near." His breath hitches, while Near's hand drags his sweater slowly up. "Is this really the time and the place to be talking about books?"

"Perhaps not," admits Near. "Perhaps later would be better. But we're ruining my puzzle."

Matt demonstrates in the most direct way possible that he doesn't give a *damn* about Near's puzzle.

Life isn't story-shaped. Which is to say, it goes on. It has ups and downs, it doesn't always go according to plan or end well, and we don't always feel resolution when a chapter comes to a close.

It's a lot easier to parcel into packages in retrospect. So while Matt and Near go on bickering and struggling, and occasionally waking up in hospitals (far more often than Gevanni would like, and giving Rester gray hairs more early than he appreciates) this story shaped part of their existence comes to a close.

Because it is a story, and for these meagre few pages they are just the same as Arthur Dent, Bernard Mickey Wrangle, Billy Pilgrim, Gregor Samsa, Major Kovalyov and Mr Golyadkin, they do get a storybook ending.

Are you ready? Here it comes:

And they both lived happily ever after.

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AN: It's been a slice, ladies and gentlemen, but the curtain has come down. Thank you again to all of you who have reviewed, and to all those of you who will (subliminalmessagingreviewreviewsbliminal) and to everyone reading. The bitch is WRAPPED.